

Eating right can save the world

By Tim Zimmermann, *Outside*

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” That’s what the French lawyer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who happened to have a deep love of gastronomy, wrote in 1825. A century later, a diet-hawking American nutritionist named Victor Lindlahr rendered it as: “You are what you eat.” I propose revising it further: Tell me what you eat and I will tell you how you impact the planet.

Most of us are aware that our food choices have environmental consequences. (Who hasn’t heard about the methane back draft from cows?) But when it comes to the specifics of why our decisions matter, we’re at a loss, bombarded with confusing choices in the grocery-store aisles about what to buy if we care about planetary health. Are organic fruits and vegetables really worth the higher prices, and are they better for the environment? If I’m a meat eater, should I opt for free-range, grass-fed beef? Is it OK to buy a pineapple flown in from Costa Rica, or should I eat only locally grown apples?

The science of food’s ecological footprint can be overwhelming, yet it’s important to understand it. For starters, in wealthy societies food consumption is estimated to account for 20 to 30 percent of the total footprint of a household. Feeding ourselves dominates our landscapes, using about half the ice-free land on earth. It sends us into the oceans, where we have fished nearly 90 percent of species to the brink or beyond. It affects all the planet’s natural systems, producing more than 30 percent of global greenhouse gases. Farming uses about 70 percent of our water and pollutes rivers with fertilizer and waste that in turn create vast coastal dead zones. The food on your plate touches everything.

“If you look at the heavy-hitter list of global-scale changes that are human induced, how we feed ourselves is invariably near the top,” says Peter Tyedmers, a professor at Dalhousie University’s School for Resource and Environmental Studies (SRES) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who has been studying the world’s food systems for 15 years. “But the great thing about food is that we have choices, and we have the opportunity to effect change three times a day.”

So what does a sustainable diet actually look like? I’ve thought a lot about my food choices and became a vegan a few years ago, but I still don’t know all the answers. So I set out to find them.

I didn’t go hunting for a crazed notion of perfection. I was simply looking for an attainable way to eat—whether you’re a vegan, a vegetarian, or an omnivore. Here’s what I discovered.

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